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BRIEF DIVERSIONS

By

J. B. PRIESTLEY 

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BRIEF DIVERSIONS

Short, but there's salt in 't

THE DOUBLE-DEALER

BRIEF DIVERSIONS

being Tales Travesties

and Epigrams

by

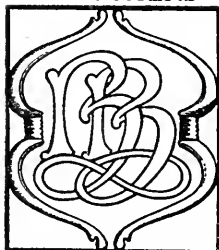
J. B. PRIESTLEY

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NOTE

NEARLY all these pieces have appeared in the CAMBRIDGE REVIEW, and I thank the Editor for his courtesy in allowing me to reprint them. A few travesties and epigrams have been added, and others have been revised. Most of the tales were written during the War, many of them while I was in Flanders, and at that time, being away from books, I imagined I was doing something new, being either ignorant or forgetful of the work of better men, such as Lord Dunsany and Mr T. W. H. Crosland, in a very similar form. To such gentlemen, I can only offer an apology if I seem to enter their little pleasaunces and tread clumsily where they who went before me stepped so lightly and delicately.

J. B. P.

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TALES

TALES

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF KNOWING EVERYONE

A PROFITEER, a Priest of Nebt-het, from Heliopolis, and a Fool were walking together one day, when they met the grim figure of War belching flame and fury.

‘Who is that?’ asked the fool and the priest of each other, quickening their pace. But the profiteer raised his hat, bowed humbly, and stayed to chat for a few moments with the terrible figure, before re-joining his companions.

Presently, they came upon Death, mumbling to himself by the roadside. The fool and the profiteer raised their eyebrows, and passed on, but the priest of Nebt-het touched his forehead and made certain strange signs with his hands, to which Death replied in like manner.

Then the three spied a beautiful woman who sat among the wild flowers. It was Love, combing her hair and singing all the love-songs of the world. ‘That is a fine woman,’ said the profiteer, staring hard.

‘I do not know her,’ said the priest, somewhat sadly. But the fool ran forward and caught her hands in his, and they laughed together. So the priest and the profiteer walked on, but when they had gone a little way, they turned round, and there was the fool sitting at her feet and looking into her eyes as she sang and combed her hair.

‘The fool has all the luck,’ they grumbled.

A MOVING STORY OF REAL LIFE

THERE was at one time upon the earth a Mr S. L. Binkle, who always spoke of himself as a Business Expert. He would, from time to time, scatter broadcast little sheets of paper, on which was printed: 'Efficiency! What does it mean to you?' and many other dark sayings.

This Binkle was a middle-aged man who lived strangely: he never laughed or sang or ate heartily, though some have said that he had a weakness for tapioca pudding.

It chanced that one afternoon when he was sitting in his office, there was some noisy music in the street near by, so Binkle put small pieces of cotton-wool in his ears. Far away, the gods laughed.

A few minutes later, the office door was flung open, and a red-faced man rushed in, crying: 'You Mister Binkle? . . . come down to Balham . . . next Tuesday evening . . . talk on Business Efficiency . . . no time to stop . . . train . . . ask for Mechanics Institute . . . five guineas.' After which, the stranger departed noisily.

These loose fragments of speech were quite intelligible and, indeed, welcome to Binkle, who made a note in a little book and smiled with satisfaction.

But alas—who can foresee what the gods have decreed? For, with the cotton-wool in his ears, Binkle had not heard the stranger rightly; and on the Tuesday following, instead of going to Balham, he went to Barham, which is full of poets and wild lovers, and there he perished miserably.

THE TRUE ACCOUNT OF A QUARREL BETWEEN A MAN WE ALL KNOW AND A VERY OLD FAMILY

THE Man who thought about Proteids sat by the roadside, writing with an indelible pencil in a little notebook. And Spring, all in pink and white, came tripping by, and cried to him: 'I will dance for you! Watch me dance!' She danced very prettily, but the Man went on writing, and never looked at her once. So Spring, being young, burst into tears, and told her sister, Summer.

Summer said to herself: 'Spring is very foolish to cry. Probably he does not like dancing. I will sing to him.' She sang a beautiful sleepy song to him, but he never listened, being busy writing in his little notebook. Summer was indignant, and told her sister, Autumn.

Autumn said: 'There are many good men who do not like dancing. I will give him some of my wine.' So she went to the Man and offered him her purple wine, but he merely said, 'I do not drink wine,' and resumed his writing. Then Autumn was very angry indeed, and told her big brother, Winter, all that had passed.

Winter was an enormous fellow, with a dreadful roar and howl, and every time he moved, snowflakes came whirling from his flowing robes. 'Show me the fellow,' he bellowed, puffing out his cheeks. Then he saw the Man who thought about Proteids, still sitting by the roadside.

‘Do you know me?’ roared Winter, and the Man looked and his teeth chattered like dead men’s bones.

Then Winter seized him by the neck and whirled him round and round, and finally flung him over his left shoulder into space.

And the Man who thought about Proteids has not been seen since, but, the other day, a boy found the little note-book lying by the roadside.

AT THE 'RED LION,' RAMPLE STREET

RATHER late one Saturday evening, Bacchus walked into the 'Red Lion Inn,' at the corner of Rample Street. He said nothing, but looked at the landlord, who, on his part, was trying to discover the 'company' (meaning rank or station) of the new customer; so that he should know whether to open the door of the Private Bar or Best Room, or wave his hand in the direction of the Tap-room: this is the great problem and test for all inn-keepers in England.

The landlord was still puzzling his brains, when the god spoke in a rich, mellow voice: 'Happy mortal, let us drink and sing together, and talk of the laughing glories of the world. See! I will garland thy brow with leaves of vine.' And he stepped forward.

The landlord recoiled hastily. 'No you don't,' he snarled, 'you get nothing 'ere. Outside.'

The god did not move, so the landlord grew angry and cried: 'Outside I say! 'Ere Bill! Jack! Throw 'im out!'

Bacchus, taken by surprise, was immediately flung through the swing doors, landing at the feet of a policeman outside.

On Monday, the god was fined many shillings for being drunk and disorderly, but fortunately no one in the police-court recognised him, for that morning he was dressed in an old suit and wore a cloth cap and red scarf, so that he looked like one of those men who shave only on Saturday afternoons.

THE DANGER OF ACCEPTING GIFTS WHILE HOLDING MUNI- CIPAL OFFICE

A POET, wishing to remove from Shotterden to Camden Town, found himself sadly encumbered with dreams and decided to give them away before he left.

He started with the little cripple girl next door, to whom he gave two splendid dreams of laughing gardens, and then went all round Shotterden (it is not a very large town) giving away his dreams.

When he returned to his lodging, he found he had one dream left, so he went to the policeman who always stood at the corner of the street, and said: 'I cannot understand it. I have one dream left, yet I think I have given one to every person in the town, and to some I have given two.'

'There is the Mayor—' replied the policeman, doubtfully.

'The very man! I had forgotten him!' cried the Poet, and ran off to find the Mayor.

The Mayor accepted the gift very reluctantly, and tried to get rid of it, but it clung to him persistently, as dreams do. It was a good dream, a dream of the white neck of a queen who died four thousand years ago, but the Mayor did not want it.

As time went on, it weighed upon him more and more, and when he should have been attending to Municipal Affairs or Opening a Bazaar, he found his mind wandering, and he was for ever brooding on the dead queen.

Until one day, when the Council was discussing a new Byelaw to prevent Children from playing in the Public Parks, he was asked to speak, and, full of the dream, he burst into song, to the great astonishment of all present. He was then asked to resign, which he did.

And now, hardly anyone ever calls or even leaves a card.

THE HUMILIATING EXPERIENCE OF A FORGOTTEN GOD

THE great Babylonian god, Marduk, revisiting the earth in the guise of a young man, fell in love with a girl in the silk Department of the Universal Stores. Her name was Lena.

‘O moon-faced one! O white flower of the world! I adore thee,’ Marduk whispered. ‘Thou hast the look of Sarpanitum, the leopard-eyed goddess, in days of old when the stars were young and kind!’

‘Well, well,’ cried Lena, ‘what will you do to please me?’

‘I will rebuild Babylon in an hour for thee,’ shouted the god, and away he sped to the great, silent plain, where he laboured mightily. In a short space of time he returned and wafted her away to the scene of his labouring.

‘Look, look,’ he cried, and waved his hand. And there was Babylon, the mighty city of splendour and dream, shimmering and glittering, the wonder of the world. There were the great gates, the towering palaces, the hanging gardens, as of old.

‘Well?’ and Marduk turned to her eagerly when she had gazed her fill, and wiped his forehead, for even he sweated from his vast labours.

Lena looked at him: ‘Yes, it’s very nice,’ she said.

HOW THE RATIONAL AMUSEMENTS OF THE GREAT ARE LIMITED

BEFORE your time, two Mummers and a Unitarian were seated in a tavern playing cards, when a long, sallow-faced man, dressed in black, joined them and asked if he might have a game.

He was received cordially, and Whist was proposed, the civilisation of the world not having arrived at Bridge at that time.

The Unitarian dealt out the cards, and the Man in black sorted and scrutinized his hand in the manner of one who takes a keen interest in the game.

‘By the way, what are trumps?’ he asked.

‘Hearts,’ replied one of the Mummers.

‘Hearts! Hearts! Red Hearts!’ screamed the Man in black, springing to his feet and spilling his cards in anger. ‘How the myself can I play with hearts as trumps! Any other suit would have done splendidly!’ And, with a loud cry, he jumped through the floor, and as he went the others caught a glimpse, through the crack, of flames, curling and leaping.

It is not recorded whether the Unitarian was the more surprised or the two Mummers.

THE IMPRUDENCE OF A POLITICIAN IN TRAVELLING FURTHER THAN THE NEWSPAPERS

THE Member of Parliament for West Churchling had walked far, and, losing his way in the darkness, came to the World's End. There he spied the Hostel, where, round a bright fire, were seated the three Watchers, Arshel of the Twisted Nose, Zanoah of the Bright Hair, and the other whose name I can never remember.

They gave him greeting, and he sat down and warmed his hands by the fire.

Presently, Arshel turned to him and said, 'Sing us a song.'

The Member of Parliament said with dignity, 'I cannot sing.'

The three Watchers sighed and looked at him reproachfully.

'Then dance for us,' said Zanoah, picking up a little pipe.

'I cannot dance,' returned the Member of Parliament sadly. The three Watchers sighed more deeply.

'Then tell us a tale,' said the one whose name I can never remember. The Politician pondered for a moment, then began:

'At the last General Election it was decided that our Party should appeal to the country to support those studied and careful reforms necessary from time to time in an enlightened community like ours. Questions of Tariff, Extension of the Franchise, Disestablishment of the Church, Free Commercial

Education for the Masses, were to be the pillars by which our Party should stand or fall. I myself——'

'It is too long,' cried Arshel.

'It is a poor tale,' cried Zanoah.

'It is the worst tale I have ever heard,' cried the one whose name I can never remember, 'and you are no company for us.'

So they thrust the Member of Parliament for West Churchling out into the cold night.

THE WRONG WORLD

ONE Saturday night, not many years ago, there was a great crowd at the end of Toston Street, Littlebury.

‘Nah then. Nah then. Wot’s all this abart?’ cried a policeman, shouldering his way through the curious throng.

In the centre of the crowd was a small cleared space, in which was seated, on the edge of the pavement, a strange being with dark blue hair and greenish-tinted skin.

‘Nah then,’ said the policeman, pulling out his note-book, ‘wot’s all this?’

The strange being, on whom the gift of tongues must have descended, looked up and said: ‘Where am I?’

‘Come on. Wot’s the game, eh? Who are yer, eh? Wotcher doing ’ere?’ roared the policeman, his surprise making him more truculent than usual.

The strange being made no reply, but stared at the policeman, and then looked gravely at the curious, jostling crowd.

‘I know! I know!’ he cried triumphantly, springing to his feet. ‘I’m on—just a minute, I’ll remember—somewhere in the Solar system—I’ve got it—the Earth! That’s it—the Earth! The fools... giving me the wrong directions. I want Morchas, in the Lunar system—the other side of Pleiades. Fancy striking this place again! I’ve been on the Earth before. I was murdered here for speaking the truth, ten thousand years ago. Bah!’

With that he disappeared, to the great astonishment of all present.

THE VALUE OF A NEW POINT OF VIEW

SAILING westward from the Island of Fata Morgana, I came upon Pierrot in his little white boat. We were old acquaintances, and I asked him if the gods were still using him kindly, and how things were looking on the Moon, his home.

‘I have been away from home for some time,’ he replied, ‘but am just about to return. Will you come with me?’

So I clambered into his little boat, and told my own ship to return to the Island of Fata Morgana. We sailed on and on, Pierrot enlivening the dim hours with his strange Moon-songs, until at last he brought the boat to anchor in a little bay, and I landed, for the first time, at the pale country of the Moon.

‘You know,’ I said to Pierrot, as we wandered among the fantastic green shadows, ‘I have always longed to visit the Moon. The World is so dull, now, and the Moon always seemed to us such a mad and merry place.’

Pierrot stared—‘That is very strange! Up here we have always believed the reverse of that. And with good reason. Look for yourself!’ and he led me to the edge of the Moon; we peered over, and there, far below, was the great shining World, looking as big as ten Moons, and a hundred times madder and merrier.

‘Pierrot,’ I cried, ‘I have mis-judged the World! Good-bye, my friend!’ and I leaped into space.

* * * * *

I landed on the roof of the Headquarters of the Society for the Extension of Commercial Careers for Women.

THE UNINVITED GUEST

A CERTAIN rich man, having discovered a new method of adulterating milk for babies, determined to celebrate his increase of fortune by giving a wonderful Fancy-dress Ball and masked Carnival.

When the evening came, the scene was a very brilliant one, the masks and costumes being of a most varied and extravagant character. About midnight, a new figure was noticed moving slowly among the crowd, a tall figure dressed in a long black cloak with a cowl, which overshadowed a grinning ghastly Death's Head. This extraordinary costume caused much comment; some of the more timid guests objected to it, but the majority found it entertaining and wondered who the wearer might be.

At one o'clock, prizes were to be given for the best costumes. Amid general applause, the Master of the Ceremonies handed the first prize to a lady dressed as Madame de Pompadour. He then cried loudly: 'The second prize goes to the gentleman who has come in the character of Death.'

All eyes were turned upon the strange figure, which stepped forward and said in a loud voice: 'I cannot accept the prize. I have won too many prizes.'

This occasioned some remark, but the prize was given elsewhere, and in a few minutes the distribution was at an end.

Then the Master gave the signal for all masks to be removed, and the guests regarded each other with flushed and happy faces. There was one exception

however, and the master called loudly to Death's Head, who stood somewhat apart from the rest: 'Sir, remove your mask.'

The figure pulled back the cowl, exposing its horrible grinning head to the light, then turned slowly as if to survey every person in the room.

'I wear no mask,' it said, simply.

HOW I MET WITH A FAMOUS CHARACTER IN A CAFÉ

SITTING in a large café, one day, I saw the strangest sight. For an old man, a wretched, dusty, unkempt dotard, entered at the far end, and shuffled swiftly along the room. And as he passed the little tables, the crowds of women there smiled on him, threw him flowers, tried to seize his hand, and endeavoured in a hundred ways to attract his attention and win his regard.

‘Now, this is surely the strangest thing that ever happened,’ I said, as the old man approached; ‘is he a famous poet, then, or has he a cellar-full of diamonds, that the women should love him so!’

He must have heard me, or noted the surprise written on my face, for when he came closer, he stayed his feet for a moment, and muttered in my ear:—

‘I was ever a great lady-killer! My name is Time’; and he chuckled horribly.

THE MUTINY

THERE was once a Jew, who lived many years in England and in time became very rich. For this, he was made a lord, and was known henceforth as Lord Roasbif. So he bought a large estate in the country, and lived the life of a good old English country gentleman.

Nothing delighted my Lord Roasbif more than to speak to large concourses of simple people, so on an evil night in November he went to the Agricultural Hall in Bosmouth, a small town on the east coast, to speak at a political meeting.

A large crowd awaited him in the hall, and the organist played 'Hearts of Oak' four times.

No one heard, from afar, a murmuring sound that gradually grew louder and louder.

There was a great clapping of hands when Lord Roasbif stood up, so that his heart was warmed and he spoke well, touching on matters political and social.

A few people at the back of the hall heard a strange sound.

My Lord Roasbif was almost inspired, and spoke of the 'Glorious Embire' and 'Our Island Raze' with wonderful fervour. But now the noise outside had grown very much louder, and all the people looked at each other in wonder and fear. There seemed to be a prodigious high tide.

'Chentlemen,' cried Roasbif, 'gome whad may, our Embire is sdill, and and always vill be as long as de Bridish raze remains—mistress of—'

'The Sea!' shrieked a hundred voices. But it was too late. The grey flood swept through the building with appalling fury and engulfed them all.

DEATH AND THE FIDDLER

THERE was once a Fiddler, who possessed a great and powerful secret. For he knew the tune, the only tune, to which Death would dance, and he could play it well. Now the Fiddler, though he had but poor health, had no great reason to fear Death, and he wedded with a girl from a neighbouring village.

On the night following the wedding, there was a merry company assembled at the house of the Fiddler, and everyone was talking, laughing or singing, when suddenly there was a tapping at the window. The Fiddler looked out and saw Death beckoning to him. So, not wishing to disturb his guests, he picked up his fiddle and went out of the house.

Remembering the tune, however, he did not wait for Death to speak, but straightway began to play, and Death, his bones rattling, started dancing in the moonlight.

The guests, missing their host and hearing the music, crowded to the window, but all they could see was the Fiddler jigging madly away. 'He wants us to dance outside in the moonlight,' cried one, and out they all went, and danced merrily with Death, who was becoming a little weary, in the middle.

'I hate parties—except in time of plague or war', panted Death to the Fiddler, and he danced away out of sight, and the Fiddler never saw him again for many, many years.

THE COLLEGE OF IMMORTAL FAME

MARUS, a young poet of Levion, was walking in the by-ways of that city, one day, when he came to a great door which he had never seen before, and above the door was written in letters of gold:

‘THE COLLEGE OF IMMORTAL FAME’

So Marus knocked loudly at the door, and when it was opened, said to the Porter: ‘I desire to enter the College.’

‘Do you desire it more than anything else in the whole world?’ asked the Porter, in a solemn voice.

‘I do,’ said Marus, whose curiosity was awakened.

He entered, and was surprised to find that the door was immediately locked and bolted behind him, and that two sentinels with drawn swords took their places in front of it. He found himself in a great hall, and nothing could be heard but sighing and groaning from every side. An old man with a long white beard came towards Marus, and laying his hand on the poet’s shoulder, said: ‘You will stay in this College for the remainder of your lifetime. Little food, less sleep, no rest, occasional moments of ecstasy in years of despair!’

‘I have made a mistake,’ muttered Marus, and louder: ‘I cannot stay here.’

‘You cannot escape now,’ said the old man, quite gently.

The young poet looked about him and spied a little door at the far end of the hall. ‘Yes, I can!’ he

cried, and ran towards the little door, hoping to find it unlocked. It was; and, his heart flooded with relief, he swung open the door and looked out.

But which ever way he looked there was nothing to be seen but vast space let with innumerable stars.

THE LONELY SOUL

JOURNEYING, in a dream, through the Portals of the Dead, I encountered an Angel, who promised to be my guide in the Strange Lands.

We saw innumerable cities, gardens, palaces, castles, all beautiful, but in a thousand and one different ways. And moving here, there and everywhere, were happy souls clad in multi-coloured, shimmering garments.

‘It makes my heart rejoice,’ I said to the Angel, ‘to see all these happy souls. But tell me, what brain devised, what hand built, these bewildering beautiful places?’

‘They were fashioned by the souls themselves, a long time ago,’ replied the Angel enigmatically. A little later, my companion said: ‘I will show you something different!’ And together, we flew away from the cities and castles, until we came to a great, flat plain or desert, on which there was neither building nor tree, nor even rock. ‘Surely this is the most desolate place in the Universe and the Seven Heavens,’ I said, as we still flew over the great plain.

‘Look,’ cried the Angel, pointing. I looked and saw far away, in the centre of the great plain, one solitary, little soul.

‘Now that is loneliness and desolation indeed,’ I said, ‘what strange and terrible sins did this man commit, that his soul should be confined to such a place?’

‘On earth,’ replied the Angel, somewhat indifferently, ‘he prided himself on having no Imagination!’

THE LOST PATH

A CHILD, whose name we have all forgotten, met three old men walking together, and to each of them put a question.

‘What is there in the heart of the forest?’

‘Nothing but trees,’ replied the first old man, shaking his head, ‘and that, as you will find, is the great sorrow of life.’

To the second old man, the child said: ‘What shall I come to, if I go beyond the hills?’

‘You will come back to this very place in time,’ he answered, mournfully, ‘and that is the saddest thing in the world.’

The child turned to the third old man, who was sighing deeply, and asked: ‘Why are you so sad?’

‘We are sad,’ said the third old man, ‘because the vanishing years have taught us wisdom, and we know all things. But you, being young, know nothing.’

And the three old men shook their heads in unison and hobbled away.

The child stood still and puzzled for a moment. Then it said to itself: ‘They did not answer those questions properly. They are wrong, but I do not know why.’

Then seeing a butterfly, the child ran after it, shouting with glee.

THE LAST GLIMPSE OF A WELL-KNOWN FIGURE IN SOCIETY

THE eternal flames curled and writhed, thrusting out their voracious tongues. There was a great roaring and hissing, and everywhere the shrieking of damned and tortured souls.

Mrs Bilkington-Biggs, late of Mayfair and 'The Laurels,' Bucks., was chatting to various acquaintances in that sprightly fashion which made her one of Society's most charming hostesses.

'What! You here'—she prattled, 'so delightful, I'm sure.—Yes—the most wonderful time—Thursday last—we dined at the Moloch-Molochs'—You *must* know them—All the nicest people there—Have you met Mr Beelzebub?—Oh, quite a charming man—knows simply everybody—He's bringing the Herod and Nero set to one of my Thursdays—Delighted to meet you, I'm sure—What, not *the* Mr Judas?—Oh—really—d'you know.—' And so she went on, glancing curiously from time to time at a great black object nearby, which seemed to form the base of a vast pillar, half hidden in the smoke.

'No, my dear,' continued Mrs Bilkington-Biggs, 'I haven't been presented to *him* yet.—I haven't seen his Highness—but, of course, you know the real season hasn't quite begun—'

The great black object moved with dramatic terrible swiftness. It was Satan's right hoof, and with one awful kick, it sent Mrs Bilkington-Biggs flying into the roaring furnace.

'Any second Thursday, you know, my dear,' wailed a voice from the heart of the flames.

ADVANCED THOUGHT AND THE FOOLISH IDLER

THERE once came to a small town a certain man renowned throughout the country for his general wisdom and his knowledge of social philosophy. A meeting was arranged, so that the inhabitants might learn something of the great social questions of the day. The majority of the townsfolk went to the meeting, and were well rewarded, for the social philosopher spoke at great length. Throughout his address, he continually referred to Demos and never without some touch of scorn. These contemptuous references to Demos were apparently understood and approved of by all present, with one strange exception.

For there was one fellow at this meeting who never should have been there, a wild, half-witted fellow, noted throughout the town as an idler and one given over to foolish laughter and odd scraps of song. Now this fool, instead of holding his peace, immediately began to denounce the learned man because he had spoken of Demos.

‘Who is this Demos?’—the fool went about crying. ‘I have been in the place all my life and I have never met him. I know old Dan the fiddler and Barty the cobbler and his lame brother and Little Snike who gets drunk on wet days and Fat Meg and her lasses and Blind Peter and the other two beggars and Long John the Watchman and hundreds more. But I never met Demos here!’ And so he went on for days, until everybody in the place was chaffing him.

THE WONDERFUL VIEW

A GAL, the son of Iran-Ovor—the swordmaker, was a great traveller, and it is recorded of him that, once, journeying beyond Cathay, he came to the Court of the great emperor, Ol-fin, and there stayed many months. The emperor made much of Agal, and showed him all his marvellous treasures and many of the wonderful sights of the empire, that the traveller might spread the fame of Ol-fin.

One day, when Agal had announced his intention of returning to his own country, the emperor said: ‘I have one other thing for you to see, and it is the most wonderful of all. It was given to me by the great god Aoh. Come, I will show you.’ And he led him through the palace, along innumerable corridors, until they came to a narrow, steep flight of stairs. There they mounted, until they came to a small apartment which appeared to be at the top of a high tower.

It had but one window, which was closely shuttered. ‘O Agal, much-travelled one,’ cried the emperor, ‘you shall see a sight you have never seen before,’ and he flung back the shutters.

Agal looked through the window, and was amazed at what he saw. ‘The dust of seven times seven kingdoms has been about my feet,’ he cried, ‘yet I never saw such beauty before. Strange, that I know the sight, yet I have never seen it before. It must have come in dreams!’

‘Ah!—It is a gift from the great god,’ said the emperor complacently; ‘it is the view that always lies just over the hill.’

THE ROOM OF LOST SOULS

ONE DAY, the Newspaper King, inspecting his office premises, came upon a little door in an upper part of the building. Turning to his private secretary, who was at his elbow, he said: 'I don't remember seeing this little door before. What is the room used for?'

'Well, sir, it is only a lumber room,' replied the secretary, 'and it is used now for souls.'

'For souls?'—The great man was surprised.

'Yes, for souls. We use it for storing the souls that you have bought from time to time. Those of the staff, you know, sir, and others,' the secretary answered, adding apologetically: 'I know, because I peeped in the other day, and saw my own. It is in the top right hand corner.'

'Ah—um!' The Newspaper King mused for a moment, then, with one of those flashes of inspiration which have made his name famous: 'Could make something out of it for the dull season. Tell Daly to do a special. Call it "Queerest Room in London"—or similar title. Get comments from Bishops—two will do.'

And he passed on, outlining to the secretary as he went, the rules for the new £10,000 competition for Piebald Rabbits.

THE CYNICISM OF ABSOLUTE MONARCHIES

THE KING was dying.
‘Go at once and bring the Court Historians,’ he cried; ‘the recital of our many wonderful virtues and deeds will charm our last remaining hours.’ The Historians came and read aloud the glorious history of his reign, but, after a little while, the King waved them aside. ‘You bore us,’ he said. ‘Let us have music,’ the King commanded, and the most skilled musicians in the kingdom came and played before him. But the music was so passionately sorrowful, joyous, heart-stirring, that the King wept. ‘Go away,’ he cried, ‘we would make Death easy, but your music is the enemy of Death!’

Then the Monarch ordered all the members of the Royal Family to come to his bedside, that he might spend his last hours in loving discourse with his kindred. But when they came, they wept so bitterly, that the King’s heart was turned to water within him, and he commanded them to depart.

The King was fretful.

‘How many different religions are there in the kingdom?’ he enquired of the chamberlain.

‘Sire, there are six great religions, and one hundred and seventy-two different sects,’ replied that worthy.

The King mused for a moment, then said: ‘Bring the Chief Priests of the six great religions!’

The Chief Priests came, and assembled near the royal bed, looking very wise.

The King raised himself wearily from his pillow, and said in a faint voice: 'We have commanded your presence here that you may explain the means we must adopt to secure the happiness of our immortal soul in the next world. You may begin.' And he sank back again into his pillows.

Then the six Chief Priests all began to talk at once, explaining their different systems, and they quarrelled and argued one with another, until nothing could be heard in the Palace but the sound of their voices. Hour after hour went by and still they wrangled, but the King had long since passed away, a happy smile upon his face.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD GOVERNMENT

ONCE, when visiting a distant country, John James (sometimes called 'The Red,' sometimes 'The Wanderer') saw a number of men being dragged to gaol through the streets of the capital. He turned to a stranger who was also looking on, and said: 'Sir, I am not of this country, as you may guess from my faltering speech. Pray tell me what these poor fellows have done that they should be thus handled.'

The stranger replied, with some heat: 'Sir, you may well ask that. These men—heroes all of them—have dared to oppose out unjust rulers. They are lovers of Truth and Freedom, and so have become the victims of that vile tyranny which passes here for government. They are all—as you can see—noble and virtuous—the friends of society.' So John James went on his way, grieved that the country should be so badly served.

Five years later, however, he found himself in the same city. Again, he saw a number of men being driven through the streets to the gaol. And again he turned to one who was standing near, but found him no stranger, for it was no other than the man he had questioned before.

'Tell me,' said John James, 'what these poor fellows have done that they should lose their freedom, or perhaps their lives.'

The other replied with more heat than before: 'Sir, that is quickly answered. These fellows—

insolent scoundrels all of them—have opposed our God-appointed rulers. Such ruffians are the enemies of Freedom and Truth, and deserve the fate that our just government has appointed for them. They are all—as you can see—vicious and depraved—the enemies of society.’

So John James passed on, pleased to learn that the country was now well governed.

THE MORAL

I MET a fair child plucking flowers near the highway, and called to her saying: 'Little one, what can I do to make you happy?'

Thereupon she came running towards me, crying, 'Tell me a tale, a tale!'

So I told her a tale of the Castle beneath the Sea, and went my way.

Soon I came upon an old man, warming his blood in the sunshine. I gave him greeting, and he creased his face with a smile, saying: 'Stay a while and I will tell you a tale.'

So I stayed, and he told me a tale I had never heard before. It was called 'The Man who could not eat Porridge'; but I have forgotten it now.

Further down the highway was the edge of a Pine Forest, dark and full of years, and as I passed I heard Time and Death whispering and chuckling together in the gloom. I hurried along and came near to the End of the World. There I met an Angel, sitting on a great flat stone.

'Tell me, Angel,' I said, 'what do you do in the High Hall of Heaven in the long evenings?'

'We tell tales,' replied the Angel, 'but they are better tales than you have ever heard or read. Go burn your books, and sit among the crows until you can understand their tongue!'

TRAVESTIES

TRAVESTIES

A DEDICATION FOR THE 'SHROPSHIRE LAD'

TO ALL THE GRAVEDIGGERS BETWEEN
LUDLOW TOWN AND HUGHLEY

YOU LADS whose trade is liming
The charnel earth anew,
A lad that has been rhyming
Takes off his cap to you.

The lads I knew at Knighton
I've shot and stabbed and drown'd
In verse that will not brighten
Lads still above the ground.

And those that you've put under,
That lie as still as stones,
The years will only plunder
The flesh from off their bones.

'Twas hard for lads in my time
To find new mournful staves,
And so I thought: 'Tis high time
All Shropshire's turned to graves.'

So take this book, and read on
The rhymes that I have made,
Till Doomsday breaks on Bredon
To end our ancient trade.

A SONG IN THE MANNER OF
MR WALTER DE LA MARE

GO-AS-YOU-PLEASE

ONCE on a summer's night
Go-as-you-please
Saw fifty-nine witches
Sat in the trees.

Ghastly wet moon-faces
Puckered and peered;
Blind things in the darkness
Gibbered and jeered;
And ev'ry witch-woman there
Wagged a thin beard.

Each had an evil dream
Under her hood;
All spinning a witch-web
Redder than blood
Across the dim spaces
Near where he stood.

Their moonish old gabblement
Loosened his knees,
Down on his face fell
Go-as-you-please.

Now ev'ry summer's night,
Go-as-you-please 'll
Sing to the crazy moon
'Pop goes the weazel.'

‘Æ’: THE INEFFABLE SPLENDOUR OF THINGUMBOB

THROUGH the pearl-grey heart of twilight, lit with amethyst and gold,
We beheld the mystic Thingumbob, in
visions fold on fold;
And the Ages bowed before him as he passed the
glimmering deep;
Wer renewed our ancient beauty and arose from dewy
sleep.
Where the starry thrones grew brighter as the heights
were touched with flame,
High above a million faces burned the crown of
What's-his-Name.
In what ivory-towered city, in what thronged and
radiant street,
Shall we see through mists of violet the shining Feet
of Feet?
Not the lily nor the lotus but the crimson flow'r of
Pain
Blossoms now to lead the spirit to the Light of
Lights again;
Now the bard of faery song and rune is set down as
a bore,
Far from Babylon and Sackville Street and boggy
Carrowmore;
Gods and heroes flee before us in a reeling fiery rout;
Earth grows faint and hungry-hearted now as dream
on dream fades out;
And the dim blue reader wonders what the poem is
all about.

SIR WM WATSON: ON RECEIVING
AN ÉDITION-DE-LUXE OF ELLA
WHEELER WILCOX

A QUEENLY gift that wears a regal dress
Of wine-flushed velvet blazoned with fine gold;
Sumptuous these lettered heralds that remain
Without the hall, bidding us enter there,
Proclaiming puissant titles for their queen;
More sumptuous still, the largesse and the feast
Of poesie within. Here in this Isle,
Where once were mighty poets, we have but known
A fugitive or sterile muse of late:
Across the sundering floods and leagues of foam,
On younger peoples in a riper clime
There falls no blight of song, but in full tide
Of passion, poets have blossomed year by year.
And greatest among these, O Wilcox, thou!
Song lived again in thee: no single note
Of human bliss or woe that did not come
Unto thy tutored and melodious tongue
And swell thy opulence of rhyme.
Shall we, who share a common speech, forget
Thy guerdon? Nay, not Tupper's beaten gold,
Nor Mistress Hemans, that white garden rose
Of song, nor Bulwer Lytton's mystic peaks
Of thought, nor Morris (Lewis of that name)
With all his large discourse and epic strain,
Shall move us more in the dark days to come.

PROFESSOR SAINTSBURY: FROM
THE HISTORY OF THE THREE
BLIND MICE (PERIODS OF EURO-
PEAN NONSENSE)

COMING to the conclusion of the whole matter, the present writer, who has more than once gone over all that has been written on the subject—with the exception of some things in Romansch and Czech—while he has been engaged on this task, must refuse to discuss at length the motives of the mice or the far-reaching results to their seemingly (though not to the literary critic or historian who has adopted the comparative method) eccentric and ill-timed trick of ‘running after,’ both of which have engaged the attention of some very excellent persons to the exclusion of all other aspects of the problem. Whoever looks at such things with one eye open for the swing of the pendulum will not be easily persuaded that the cleaving blade—for, let it be repeated, the Farmer’s Wife is worthiest of attention here—has not the fullest significance of all, from the *lever de rideau* of the ‘running after’ to the noisy epilogue of the ‘Never saw such a thing in my life.’ To some, whose *engouement* for the Classical is not entirely absurd, the structure of the three shorn rodents, in their new simplicity and austerity of outline, will come almost as a ‘Pisgah-sight.’ As a reaction from the fulltailed Romanticism that scampered blindly and heedlessly after what seemed rather a new crotchet than a true ideal, their attitude—not

unforeseen at the time when the 'Carving-knife' was first menacingly brandished—can at least be tolerated. But to the other extremists, who from their stucco citadel of the sham Romantic have derided the 'cutting-off,' and have hailed with contempt the new-old, perhaps to them unfamiliar, form of the blind three, the present writer can hold out no eirenicon. With the exception of some worthy persons who ought to have known better, and who shall be nameless here, the scoffers were for the most part half-educated journalists and other hangers-on to letters, who imagine that it is possible to write a clear lucid style without so much as a glance at Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and who cannot be expected Etc., Etc.

MR JAMES STEPHENS: 'SEUMAS
BEG AGAIN'

ALONG the road I met a red-nosed man
Who stumbled as he walked. He said to me:
'You keep away from that pub if you can;
It's all gone queer.' I said I didn't see
What could be wrong with Doolan's. 'I can't think,'
Said he, 'what we'll have next. I went in there,
Five minutes since; I'd scarcely got my drink
Before three angels with long shining hair
Came in. The first two took the dominoes
And played daft tunes upon them, while the third
Sang songs and balanced bottles on his nose.
'Fore Stephens' time, such things never occurred!
I said I didn't believe him. But I did.
He only whispered: 'Got a tanner, kid?'

A LECTURE NOT YET WRITTEN
OR DELIVERED BY PROFESSOR
SIR A. T. QUILLER-COUCH: ON
THE DIRECT METHOD

(*To be included afterwards in 'The Art of Lecturing'*)

BEAR with me, gentlemen, while I return, not unrefreshed by an eight months' interval—'apart sat on a hill retired,' to the argument of my last lecture but one, wherein we found that the Capital Difficulty of Criticism consisted in keeping to the matter in hand. 'When you wander, as you often delight to do, you wander indeed, and give never such satisfaction as the curious time requires.' So Bacon, in his letter of expostulation to Coke; and we shall do well to perpend the passage without taking to ourselves that plea of 'having a large and fruitful mind' which Bacon, in his wisdom, presented to Coke. Let us hold by the words of a writer whom our Tripos is gradually restoring to popular favour, Quintilian—'it is enough for us to mind our present business.' Suffer me then to proffer a personal experience. Once, when an undergraduate, I ... [*anecdote omitted*] ... an unforgettable experience, at least to one who is willing to pass among you as a sentimental old Victorian. But let us tune our instruments. And this brings me—for, believe me, gentlemen, I must eventually arrive somewhere—to the point I wish to make. It is this, that if we examine our literature curiously, we shall find there a certain thread, a cord of silver, twisting its way through all Letters and linking up one noble author with another. Let

me remind you that this thread was first spun in Greece . . . [*passages on compulsory Greek, the Education Act of 1870, and the Teaching of English in Schools—omitted*]. You may realise, gentlemen, how this tradition has been kept alive by men often sundered from one another by generations, if you allow me to bring before you several illuminating passages from diverse authors whose names are not pronounced here for the first time . . . [*Quotations from Aristotle, Longinus, Cervantes, Lessing, Sainte-Beuve, Newman, and Walter de la Mare omitted.*] One and all of these craftsmen, whom it is our business to study, tell us that we shall abjure the direct method only at our peril, that ultimately we shall come by more profit if we keep to the narrow road and leave the hedgerows and fields beyond innocent of our feet. It will not be easy. But—and I thank heaven for it!—literature is not easy; and even in these days, when the Correspondence School flourisheth and Pelman is in the land, no one, not I nor another, can make it so.

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI:
NEW STYLE. AS IT MIGHT POS-
SIBLY BE WRITTEN BY MR
LASCELLES ABERCROMBIE

Snavel

O WHAT can ail you, Blogg? These days
you sit
Here with your pint as mum as a dead rat,
And sick-faced too. Like an old man you look.
The harvest's in, the moon's up, girls are out;
What's got you, man?

Blogg Strange fleering things
Are working in my blood. I'll tell you this:
The other night I went down Magger's Lane,
And saw a woman there. Stood still she was,
Eating out of a paper cold wet tripe,
And drinking from a bottle. When I came
Close up to her, the clouds slid from the moon;
I saw her plain. Her greasy shawl slipt back:
Skinny and small she was. Her matted hair
Hung down about her face, but her two eyes
Burnt through like forest fires. She had a look
Of foreign parts, wild lands where witches thrive—

Snavel

O crimini! These are the tales for me.

Blogg

She lookt at me, shook back her hair and smiled.
The tripe slid noiselessly out of the paper—
A sudden gleam and it was gone. She paid
No heed, but held the bottle out to me
And spoke. Her foreign tongue made fiddlers' tunes

Not words to me; but then all women's words
At sometime are but tunes to fill their men
With moonlit madness. By now the chill air
To me came more like warmed old ale: my head
Was humming round. I grabbed the bottle neck
And drank deep, while the woman smiled and smiled,
But spoke no word. It was a witches' brew.
We plunged into the night that now was lit
With dancing fires, and roared like a great sea—
Etc., Etc.

THE LATER MANNER OF
MR W. B. YEATS

BECAUSE the fairies died in 'Ninety-nine
A queen or two, a beggar or a fool
Now serve the turn of this slow craft of mine;
Old Paudeen's rags cover the three-legged stool
Of ancient prophecy. A host of faces,
Foolish as dust, now mouth the reed-born song
At Clooth-na-bare and other windy places
Of three quaint syllables. It is a wrong
Not to be borne. What poet shall put the blame
Upon me that I now love best to sing
And dream my dream of him that had no name
Yet suddenly confronted the High King,
And cried: *Sisters and brothers have I none,*
Yet this man's father is my father's son?

A SONG: NOT IN THE COLLECTED
POEMS OF MR ALFRED NOYES

FAIRIES in the Forest, now the moon is mellow,
Dancing as they never danced through all the
dreams of men;

While I sit in the firelight, like any other fellow,
Writing little lyrics with a fountain-pen:

*Poetry like a paint-box, red and blue and yellow;
Songs about the Homeland: God save the King!*

Scent of the wild thyme from the earth is springing,
Drifting like a galleon is the golden moon;
Hear the fairy voices, singing ever singing;
Faintly from the greenwood, I can hear them croon:
*Never mind the sense of it, if the verse is ringing!
Never mind how thin it is, keep to the tune!*

The Queen is in the parlour; Drake's upon the high seas;
Newbolt's in the schoolbooks and I'm there too;
For singing songs of England, of her seas (and my seas);
Songs about the homeland, red and white and blue:
They've put me in the schoolbooks, green and purple
schoolbooks
Of England, O England (*that's the way to sing*);
While Drake's gone with the fairies, sailing where the
dreams go:

*Never mind how thin they are if the verses ring
For we're singing songs of England and God save the King!*

FROM A GREAT POLITICAL-BIOGRAPHICAL DRAMA, 'BUBB BODINGTON'
NOT YET WRITTEN BY MR JOHN
DRINKWATER

Two Chroniclers:

First Chronicler:

KINSMEN who have known the Cotswold haz
You will remember
April and June have thirty days,
So, too, November.

Second Chronicler:

Men's sowings and their reapings will deflow'r
Each blossomed chine;
Yet will a stitch prompt to occasion's hour
Give maintenance to nine.

The two together:

Circumstance brims all our years
With agonies and doubts and fears,
Generations that have flown
Harvesting but bitter loss;
Kinsmen, shall the moving stone
Garner yet its little moss?

First Chronicler:

Happy the spirits that can grow
In steadfastness,
Yet to the end possess
Their ardours.

Second Chronicler:

They alone shall know
Felicity, the wages of content,
Who thus transmute the vain and fleeting show
Into event.

The two together:

O vision on its lonely way shall find,
Kinsmen, it is an ill
And evil-blowing wind
That does not speak to someone of goodwill;
And a poor tale, shapeless indeed and crude,
Whose fragments we two cannot bind
With some such smooth and pompous platitude.

AN EPILOGUE TO 'TRIVIA'

(With apologies to Mr Logan Pearsall Smith)

I PEEPED in the Library of the Strange House and saw the dark figure of a man bobbing about. There was, too, such a rush of nasty cheap perfume through the door that I thought at first some of the bad portraits had come to life. Or is it, I asked myself, someone engaged in secret worship, the Baronet placating his private Mumbo-Jumbo or the Vicar turning in weariness to Sasabonsum? And I thought of monstrous African gods, of terrifying shapes and evil rites hidden in deep forests, of all the wildness and wonder of the dark untamed Universe . . .

But when I looked again, I saw that it was only one of our whimsical prosemen drenching his newly and meticulously written sheets with inexpensive Parma Violet and Jockey Club to hide the smell of the lamp.

EPIGRAMS



EPIGRAMS

THE OLD MAN AND THE NEWSPAPER

DAYLONG he seems to read, but as he peers
At fading print, the sheet becomes a glass,
Wherein are mirrored ghosts that smile and pass,
And lovely faces, dust these forty years.

THE STUDENT AND HIS PRELECTORS

THEY cried: 'Who learns the Truth is blest';
And forthwith gave him little tags
Of scholarship, and quickly dressed
The wonder of the world in rags.

THE OPERAS OF MOZART

WE SEE no painted thing, no foolish play,
Under the spell of his fastidious strings:
The Magic Flute pipes from the Milky Way,
Juan is deathless, Figaro has wings.

TO AN INDIFFERENT POET

YOU say the critic is a parasite:
'Tis not for such as you to scowl him down:
Only to point the way to Heart's Delight
Is better than making roads to No Man's Town.

R. L. STEVENSON

GOOD company for vagabonds or saints,
He wrought our joy out of his miseries;
Coloured our dreams with a child's box of paints;
Conquered the world with that toy sword of his.

TO CERTAIN MODERN THEORISTS

HE who confounds the young gods with the brutes,
The origin, not end, his single care,
May he be given naught but earthy roots,
When next he calls for apple, plum or pear.

THE AUTHOR OF 'THE SHROPSHIRE LAD'

AS IF a man had taken to his bed,
Called in his friends, thinking the end had come,
And having uttered words to move the dead,
Had then recovered, well and whole—but dumb.

THE POETRY OF MR W. B. YEATS

IN THIS dim region, where old phantoms flee
Before the touch, where neither sight nor news
Of our world reach us; here at best we see
Naught but the poet saluting his grave Muse.

‘Æ’

A SHEPHERD, having left the hills to roam,
Sees from afar the cities of great kings,
And so returns enraptured to his home:—
A man apart—who stammers golden things.

TO PROFESSOR G. B. SAINTSBURY

O F this, our day, 'twere easy to speak ill;
The books, the wit, the manners, could be bettered
But happily while you are with us still,
No man can say England is yet unlettered.

TO THE PRODUCER OF A RECENT LIGHT MUSICAL ENTERTAINMENT WHO BOASTED OF ITS COST

I F YOU paid thirty thousand for this stuff,
Flesh must be dear, for dirt is cheap enough.

THE STOUT IDEALIST

T HE earth itself must toil and sweat and groan
To bear this old Professor's eighteen stone;
And yet, though every day he's getting fatter,
He still denies reality to matter.

COLERIDGE

WOND'ROUS the ship, more wond'rous still its
freight,
Never another stuffed with bales like these;
Yet lost so soon; by some strange freak of Fate,
Swept rudderless into uncharted seas.

TO A DEPARTED GUEST

LADY, we go to bed before it's night,
Rather than grope in lamp or candle light:
Now that your eyes are hidden from our sight.

A VERY OLD MAN

TIME has filched all from him but some scant
show of breath,
And that but waits the casual pillaging of Death.

THE SYMPHONY

ONE crash shivers the world down to its roots,
And then the music moulds anew all things:
Strange moons sail in the laughter of the flutes;
 Newsunsblazethroughthclamourofthestrings.

OF A LADY

I NEVER see her walk into a room
But what I think: Ah, now the fiddling's done;
The world's brave footlights leap to stab the gloom;
 The curtain lifts, and see—the play's begun.

THE END

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